

It Takes Two to Tango

by HogwartsClassof91

Hermione has reason to believe Snape didn't die in the Shrieking Shack. What will happen when she finally gets the chance to prove her theory? Written as a birthday gift to ladyintheclock (Karelia).

Coldaga, Alteration, Calesita, Cadena, and Barrida

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Written as a birthday gift for the lovely Karelia who can't have normal bondage-related kinks like the rest of us ... No, she has to fixate on things like Argentina, Inner Earth theory, and cheese. ROFL. Because Karelia is so kind, she keeps telling me this fic isn't a month late (her birthday was 8-Jan) but rather eleven months early. How did I ever befriend someone so positive and optimistic? Happy (very belated) birthday, my friend.

It Takes Two to Tango

Colgada: A move in which the two partners move their torsos apart and turn together on the same axis while remaining vertical.

With skill borne of primitive survival instinct, the taxi darted through the congested streets of Bahía Blanca, careening from lane to lane. Pedestrians danced from harm's way as man and machine performed their daily ballet of throttle and brake. Despite being nearly ten o'clock in the morning, rush-hour traffic still abounded in this southernmost region of the Buenos Aires province.

At last, the car jerked to the side of the road and stopped before a magnificent fountain.

Thanks to a clever translating charm she'd learned, Hermione heard the driver say, "Here we are, Mrs. Weasley," in English, rather than the rapid Spanish he had actually spoken.

"It's Ms. Granger," she corrected automatically, regretting her tone the moment the words left her mouth. It wasn't the taxi driver's fault; she was registered at the hotel as Mrs. Weasley. Naturally, the concierge had introduced her as such when he'd arranged for her car and driver this morning. Shaking off her irritation, she amended, "But please, call me Hermione."

The driver flashed her a charming smile in the rear-view mirror. He unfolded himself from his seat and jogged around the car, opening her door with a show of gallantry that somehow managed to seem courteous rather than patronizing.

Hermione eyed his outstretched hand and accepted his assistance in exiting the car, surprised when he appeared reluctant to release her fingers.

"Forgive me, señora, but you seemed distracted when we were introduced earlier," he said. He bowed over their clasped hands. "My name is Emanuel, but I hope you will call me Manu."

"Thank you, Manu." She was grateful for his assumption; she had indeed forgotten his name in her haste to leave the hotel.

Sweeping his arm towards the fountain and the buildings behind it, he spoke in a tone infused with pride. "And this is the greatest university in all of Argentina: the Universidad Nacional del Sur."

Approaching the fountain, she spent several minutes admiring the magnificent Lola Mora sculpture group flanking the university entrance. She listened as Manu recounted the tale of the gifted artist...a rebellious and pioneering woman...whose life had ended all too sadly, in poverty and obscurity. Then her gaze travelled beyond the falling water, sweeping up the tall columns of the white building. Her pulse quickened. After so many years of wondering, of theorizing, of losing herself in wildly impractical plans to journey to this very site, at long last, she had arrived.

Manu obviously had no concept of just how monumental this moment was. He interrupted her musings by saying, "I will return in two hours, señora, as you requested."

With reluctance, she pulled her gaze from the building and turned to Manu, who was offering his business card along with another charmingly rakish smile.

"On this number, you may call me *anytime*." The appraising light in his eyes made her speculate he wasn't merely referring to any time she needed a taxi ride.

She thanked him, a bit bemused, but flattered by the appreciative smile he gave her before leaving. She knew she'd never been a great beauty, although she supposed she wasn't unpleasant to the eyes, either. But the men in Argentina had a way of looking at a woman...very different from the men in Britain...that made her feel almost ... desirable. There was nothing offensive to it, nothing like the way the men back home would get pissed at the pub and leer at a woman's chest, as if anyone could find such antics appealing. Thus far, the Argentine men she'd met would put her countrymen to shame. She'd been in South America for two whirlwind days, and already felt less like the mother to two teenage children and more like a woman than she had in a very, very long time.

But she hadn't come to Argentina for the men, and she certainly hadn't traveled this far to receive flattery from strangers. She had come with a purpose...the quest of a lifetime...and she wasn't leaving until she'd satisfied her curiosity.

Straightening her back, she strode past the fountain and approached the main building. Her feet carried her beneath the columns and into the university entrance hall where she gazed upon a coat of arms in blue and gold. A faint tingle swept down her spine as she read the school motto:

Ardua Veritatem

"Truth is obtained by effort," she mumbled beneath her breath, oblivious to the throngs of students moving around her. Effort was good...she had never been afraid of effort. She was a firm believer in hard work and thorough research. Nothing short of that would have enabled her to be standing at this exact spot, at this exact moment.

Anticipation thrummed through her chest as she located a map and found the Science building. Her eyes searched for the Chemistry classroom, and she hurried away with one thought in her mind.

And now for the truth.

Alteration: *A move in which the direction of the move is altered during its execution.*

Hermione paused outside the classroom door and removed a piece of paper from her knapsack, unfolding it with great care. The brief article...summarizing a study on the effects of the native Argentine plant yerba mate...had been published more than a decade earlier, though judging by its condition alone, it might have been twice that age. There were holes along each crease from being folded and unfolded numerous times. The paper was so worn, it resembled cloth more than parchment, draping over her fingers like an old, threadbare handkerchief. The words were barely discernible, but that mattered little; she had memorized them long ago and could recite the article verbatim if anyone asked. Of course, no one ever asked.

Her eyes sought and found the lines that had sent her on this journey, confirming suspicions no one else had seemed interested in:

While the xanthines in yerba mate prove to be effective stimulants, similar to caffeine, all evidence of its use as an aphrodisiac is purely anecdotal. Consuming a yerba mate infusion does not increase sexual potency...as some have claimed...nor does it possess the power to bewitch the mind or ensnare the senses.

And there it was. *Bewitch the mind, ensnare the senses.* The words had mesmerized her at eleven years old, imprinting themselves upon her psyche so indelibly that the instant she had read them nearly twenty years later, she had been transported back to the dungeons, back to the cold Potions classroom. Back to the world of Severus Snape.

According to the editors' note at the bottom of the page, the article had been written by Santiago Sanchez, a professor of Chemistry at the Universidad Nacional del Sur in Bahía Blanca, Argentina. Hermione had been deliriously happy when she had read the article, certain it proved a theory she had held since the day Voldemort had died. The faded words blurred into oblivion as she allowed the memories to float into her mind.

She had sat with the Weasleys for hours, shocked and numb. The many losses had been mourned in silence; she had lacked the words to provide comfort, to ease the pain. Indeed, she had felt certain such words did not exist. Unable to bear the sorrow any longer, she had left the castle grounds, no destination in mind, and had found herself walking the familiar path to Hogsmeade. Her feet had stopped outside the Shrieking Shack, and her mind had conjured the memory of Professor Snape dying before her. With perfect clarity, she had known that scene would haunt her for the rest of her life. She had spent several moments playing a dreadful game of 'what if,' berating herself for not trying to save Snape. She had had a bottle of Dittany in her bag; why hadn't she at least tried to use it? It might not have worked, but if it had ...

Of course, at that point, she, like everyone else, had still believed Snape had been just another Death Eater. He had murdered Dumbledore...he had shown his true loyalties had been with Voldemort. Only ... he hadn't, really. He had been a pawn, an invaluable piece in someone else's demented puzzle. He had been instructed to take the life of the only man who had known the truth of his allegiance, only to be murdered by the time anyone had known the truth.

She had stood outside the Shrieking Shack until the sun had risen high in the sky, lost in guilt and a different kind of sorrow. Reconciling the bitter man she had known to the things Harry had seen in the Pensieve had taken all her concentration, and it had been some time before she had noticed the parade of Ministry Aurors hurrying in and out of the old building. She had dismissed them at first glance, assuming they had simply come to investigate and...inevitably...remove the body. But after several long minutes had passed, the activity around the building had grown almost frantic, and several more Aurors had appeared.

A pair had walked close enough for her to catch a snippet of their conversation.

"... He can't have gone far."

"Did you see the amount of blood on the floor? I'm not convinced he went anywhere on his own."

"What? You think someone moved the body?"

They had seen her then, and their conversation had quickly ceased. But it had been enough to explain the ever-growing Ministry presence, enough to plant a seed in her head that had grown and blossomed with time. She had stayed long enough to see Kingsley Shacklebolt arrive. She had waited patiently while he had conferred with the Aurors. Seizing her opportunity, she had approached him.

"You can't find Professor Snape?" she had asked.

He had seemed so stunned by her question that he hadn't bothered to consider the wisdom of shaking his head and answering, "His body is gone. We've searched

everywhere."

Eyes wide, he had grabbed her by the shoulders and had given her a soft shake. "Did you see anyone else around this building? Anyone at all?"

"No."

"Did you move his body?" he had asked.

"Of course not. He was on the floor when I...we...left."

"And you're certain he was dead?"

She had opened her mouth to answer, but no words had ever come out. And just like the scene she had witnessed inside the Shrieking Shack, Kingsley's words had haunted her for many, many years. Of course, he had adamantly denied the entire encounter later. Snape's death had been reported in the newspapers, and a small funeral had even been arranged. Hermione had been convinced that something suspicious had happened, and she had spent the next several years trying to convince Ron, Harry, Ginny, and anyone else who would listen of her case. They had tolerated her theories for a while, dismissing the rants as her method of dealing with the trauma they had all experienced. Before long, she'd had more people who would support S.P.E.W. than had been willing to hear another second's worth of dissertation on the whereabouts of Severus Snape's body.

So she had stopped mentioning it. She had gone back to Hogwarts and had finished seventh-year properly before landing a job at the Ministry of Magic. A few years later, she had married Ron and had entered the complicated business of motherhood. Ron had left Auror training to work with George in the joke shop, and more importantly, he had found something in life he both loved and excelled at: fatherhood. His skills as a dad had never failed to amaze her, and in many ways, they had made an otherwise lackluster marriage quite livable.

They had also given her the opportunity to develop a successful career at the Ministry. Amidst her time spent securing rights for house-elves and other creatures, she had confronted Kingsley once again with the mystery of Snape's disappearance.

"Hermione, I want you to listen to me," Kingsley had told her, his voice full of power and command. "Stop asking questions about Snape. Drop. It. Now. I'm only going to tell you this once."

In actuality, he had spent the next *several* years telling her over and over, again and again. He had obviously failed to appreciate how the term "drop it," when spoken to someone like Hermione, would be perceived as incentive rather than discouragement. She had thrown herself into the business of having Snape's record officially expunged and, after much effort, had even obtained a posthumous Order of Merlin for him. Using her Ministry contacts and resources, she had spent countless hours researching the truth behind the events in the Shrieking Shack, but had been frustrated and stymied time and time again.

When she had stumbled upon the article on yerba mate...more than a decade after the disappearance of Snape's body...she had become convinced that this Santiago Sanchez had met her old Potions professor at some point. Perhaps he even possessed some useful information. And naturally, her logical mind couldn't ignore the fact that Severus Snape and Santiago Sanchez shared the same initials. The possibility of them being one and the same...however far-fetched...had been enough to convince her that contacting Sanchez would have to be done in person, rather than by post. Unfortunately, the opportunity to travel to Argentina...to leave behind all responsibilities and pursue a somewhat shaky theory on a whim...had never presented itself. Until now.

"Are you lost, señora?" asked a young woman, shaking Hermione from her recollections of the past.

"Is this the classroom where Professor Sanchez teaches?" she asked.

"Si, señora," she answered.

"Gracias," said Hermione, poking her head inside. It was a large, auditorium-style classroom, and she was surprised to see nearly all of the chairs full. Acting on impulse, she followed a student inside and slipped behind an empty desk near the top of the room.

Folding the worn article with reverence, she tucked it into a pocket inside her blazer, alongside her wand. She felt exposed without her robes, but January in Argentina meant warm, sunny days, and her wizarding wear would have surely been out of place in this Muggle university.

A door at the bottom of the classroom opened, and a man walked to the desk in rapid yet graceful strides.

She thought she heard him mumble, "Good morning," but the sound was faint and muffled. His head was down; a black curtain of hair covered his face as he bent over a leather portfolio. He removed several large notebooks and set them upon the desk.

Hermione leaned forward in her seat, anxious to get a glimpse of the mysterious Santiago Sanchez. Then he straightened and turned towards the room, and her breath caught in her throat. Barring the existence of a heretofore-unknown twin, the wildest of all her theories had just been proved: Severus Snape was alive.

His lips were moving, but she registered none of the words he spoke. She couldn't stop staring at him. To see him alive was shocking, and just barely less shocking was the sight of Snape dressed in Muggle clothes. His black jacket and trousers were similar enough to his old teaching garb that she quickly recovered from that surprise. Perhaps his physiognomy was the most disturbing aspect of all: he had aged remarkably well, and his face seemed to have hardly changed. Even from this distance, she could see his eyes, the bottomless, black depths that had mocked her in dreams and pervaded her thoughts. They were still so intense. And now they were fixed upon her, unblinking.

She gave a small start when she realized he had stopped speaking. All eyes had turned to investigate the woman who had captured the professor's attention. She had no idea how much time had passed as they silently stared at each other. The buzz of conversation around her began softly but grew as the seconds ticked into minutes. And still she found herself unable to look away, unable to fully accept she wasn't dreaming.

He spun on his heel, turning his back to her at last. If he'd been wearing robes, they would have snapped around him magnificently, but alas, his Muggle clothing clung to his body. Tilting her head slightly, she realized his wizarding robes had actually been hiding a rather nice view, something his fitted trousers displayed to the best advantage. But she had very little time to ogle Snape's surprisingly fine rear. He snatched the portfolio from the desk...leaving the notebooks behind...and bolted from the room.

Hermione blinked several times, mentally debating whether to remain seated, in case he returned, or leave the classroom and attempt to find him. The door at the base of the room opened once more, and again, she strained forward in her chair. The instant she saw the appearance of a small, harried-looking man, she slid from her chair and hurried to the door at the top of the room, her ears ringing over the sound of the newcomer offering some inane excuse for Professor Santiago's abrupt departure.

Damn it! thought Hermione. How could she have found him and lost him in the space of so little time? She sped through the building, stopping to blink in the bright sunlight when she found the exit. With a discreet tug, her wand was pulled from her blazer and tucked into her sleeve, beneath her wrist, hidden from sight. A spell was chanting silently inside her mind. Traces of magic would be easy to detect amongst the swell of Muggles surrounding her, as would a wizard capable of such. Turning in a slow circle, she stopped when she felt a vibration in her wand...faint, yet unmistakable. Hurrying in the direction her wand was pointing, she prayed she could find him before he disappeared. Again.

Calesita: A move in which the follower is drawn to lean forward, balanced on one foot while the leader walks, forwards or backwards, in a tight circle around her.

Severus rounded the corner of a sun-bleached building and waited. He knew she would follow him, knew she would never give up. A part of him had always known this day

would arrive. Kingsley had warned him of her tenacity, her dogged determination to pursue him despite all efforts to dissuade her. But his last missive...one of only three letters he'd received from Kingsley...had been sent many years ago. When the relentless little witch hadn't shown herself after all this time, he'd assumed she'd found something else to occupy her mind. No doubt some obscure gnat was on the brink of extinction and demanded her unique brand of perseverance.

Severus's smirk quickly faded into a scowl when he was struck with a sudden realization. He had become complacent. He no longer took evasive measures when he traveled to work. He hadn't bothered to disguise his appearance when visiting public areas in several months. He had allowed himself to become comfortable, settling into easy habits, donning familiar routines like a pair of old slippers. He shook his head, disappointed with himself and wondering when exactly he had stopped worrying about her impending arrival. His dismissal of her potential visit hadn't ever fully erased her from his mind, although he would have greatly preferred her absence there. Much like the girl herself, his thoughts of her were exceedingly annoying, creeping into his head uninvited at the oddest of times.

Not that they'd ever played out quite like this, of course. Peering around the side of the building, he watched her draw even with the far corner. He flattened himself against the wall, allowing heat from the sun-soaked stone to seep through his clothes and caress his back. Grateful for the relative seclusion, he spied an alcove further down the wall, almost completely hidden from sight.

Perfect, he thought. He waited until Hermione had just cleared the side of the building before grabbing her around the waist with a speed that would have surprised men half his age. With one fluid motion, he dragged her into the alcove, pressing her into the shadows. The dark recess was markedly cooler than the sun-bright walls of the building. Her body shivered against his. He patted the pockets of her blazer, and feeling no wand, he slipped beneath the fabric to explore further. She gasped when his hands moved down her hips, his fingers probing as he searched. Her back pockets were empty, but the feel of lush curves filling his hands as he moved them over her body sent an excess of blood rushing to his groin. His hands slid higher, caressing the small of her back before moving to her sides and ribs, and then higher still, until he felt the gentle swell of breasts beneath his palms. A part of him knew she hadn't stowed her wand inside her bra, but another part was quickly convinced he shouldn't dismiss any possibility. Constant vigilance, and all that.

Other than an occasional gasp or the brief, surprised cry when he had first grabbed her, she had uttered no sounds. But as his telltale hardness pressed into her abdomen, and his motions became slower and gentler, he heard her clear her throat.

"Is that a wand in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?" she asked in a whisper.

He had grown accustomed to the dark enclosure by now, and he peered down into large, brown eyes that seemed to sparkle with mischief.

"I was looking for your wand," he bit out.

"Oh, is that what you kids are calling it these days?" Her arm rose into the air, and with several graceful swirls of her wrist, she was pulling her wand from her sleeve.

He snatched it from her fingers, more than a little annoyed when she didn't seem the least bit afraid of him.

"How did you ever survive a war with such poor defenses?"

Her shoulders raised in a careless shrug. "I know who to trust."

"Surely you're not referring to me?" he asked. His bark of laughter filled the air, echoing off the tight walls surrounding them. He was a tad mollified when she shivered again, but he wasn't certain whether his words or the chilled air had elicited her response.

"I had always assumed you were the bright one in your little trio," he told her, watching her eyes narrow and fill with suspicion. "You've just proved yourself the biggest fool of all."

After tucking her wand inside his pocket, he wrapped his arm around her waist and brought her body hard against his. He felt her hands against his chest, pushing, but they stilled instantly when he placed his lips to her ear and whispered, "Too late now. You're coming with me."

The heady scent of lemon and coconut...a bizarre mixture that somehow made sense on her skin...filled his abundant nostrils as he clutched her tightly and spun, Disapparating with a satisfyingly loud pop.

Cadena: A repetitive sequence of moves in which the couple each execute a series of similar moves in a chain around each other.

Hermione stopped spinning, relieved and yet somehow regretful when Snape instantly stepped away from her. She found herself gazing at rolling, green hills, breathing air perfumed by the sweet, lush grasses. After the bustle of Bahía Blanca, the peace of the countryside settled upon her slowly, like a feather floating towards the ground, soothed by gentle breezes stirring the air. The only sound she heard was an occasional bleat from one of the sheep dotting the hillsides. It was like stepping into a postcard, but she was given the briefest of moments to appreciate it before being yanked along a well-worn path.

"It's beautiful," she called out to Snape's back as he dragged her rather unceremoniously behind him. He responded with a grunt and an impatient tug on her wrist. She hurried along, her head swinging back and forth to take in as much of the scenery as possible. Around Snape's skulking form, she caught a glimpse of a quaint farmhouse, its many windows sparkling jewel-bright in the sun.

They stopped at a long, black fence, and Hermione read an iron sign hanging over the gate.

"Casa del Jaan?" she asked.

He seemed as if he'd rather not speak. A familiar scowl crossed his face as he stood there, holding the gate open. After a moment, he sighed and said, "It was named by the couple who owned the house before me."

"How long have you lived here?" she asked, trying mightily to stifle the many questions swimming in her mind but unable to keep one of the smaller ones from escaping.

She thought he wasn't going to answer, but as they walked towards the house, he pointed to a small outbuilding. Nestled beneath a trumpet tree covered in a riot of yellow blooms, it looked safe and comfortable. "I leased the shed upon my arrival in Argentina, more than two decades ago. The farm was given to me when the owners left."

"Where did they go?"

He stopped walking abruptly and turned to survey her, one eyebrow raised. She wondered if he might hex her for asking so many questions, but he appeared to be studying her carefully.

"I don't know where they went," he admitted at last. "They said they'd located an 'entrance' and would no longer require their earthly possessions."

"Were they going somewhere to die?" she asked, bewildered by his story. *Perhaps this was some strange, Argentine farmer custom*, she mused.

"I don't believe so," answered Snape. "They said they'd been invited to join others, and all their needs would be taken care of."

"Are you quite sure they were mentally stable?" she asked, incredulous. An unpleasant image of a confused couple walking into oblivion had filled her mind.

"I assure you they were of sound mind and body," he said, disdain for her doubt sharpening the edges of his voice. "In fact, they were probably the most self-actualized people I'd ever had the pleasure to meet."

"But weren't you concerned for them? For their well-being?" she persisted.

"They didn't appear to want...or need...my concern," he stated with finality. "Besides, what kind of fool would argue with a gift like this?" His arm swept over the view of the farmhouse as they approached.

"I suppose." Hermione had to admit it truly was a lovely old home. The entire front façade was adorned with a covered porch, offering a view of the green valley and distant mountains. White-washed rocking chairs littered the enclosure, and small tables were scattered about, ready to hold a cold drink or the evening's reading selection. Her brows drew together as she pondered the mental image of Snape, dressed all in black, amidst this sea of white and light.

Perhaps because she was frowning, Snape made a derisive "tsk" sound and said, "I see you're still determined to champion the rights of those who don't require your help."

"It's habitual," she told him with a flippant shrug. She turned to meet his gaze and deliberately lowered her voice. "I've a weakness for lost causes."

His expression changed, softened for the barest of seconds. Then his face became a mask, and he snaked his hand out to grab her arm and march her into the house.

Her first impression of his home was one of neatness and order. And books. Everywhere she turned, books lined the walls: row upon row of perfectly arranged tomes, a stalwart army of essays ready to march into duty. She had little time to admire her surroundings, though, as Snape pulled her through the rooms until they stopped in a cheery kitchen. Sunlight danced through the many windows, playful and inviting where it fell upon simple, latched rugs covering a worn, wooden floor.

Hermione sighed when Snape pulled her knapsack from her shoulder and shoved her into a chair. *Honestly*, she thought, rolling her eyes as he stood behind her. What kind of a threat did he suppose she was? Obviously a fairly potent one, she realized, judging by the way he pulled her hands behind her back and muttered a spell to bind them.

"You've already taken my wand," she pointed out. "I'm not exactly a flight risk."

He didn't reply, merely tugged at her wrists in an apparent desire to ensure the bonds were unbreakable.

"I came here to find you," she tried to explain. "To prove to myself you hadn't perished that day in the Shrieking Shack. Nothing more."

He grunted and hauled her knapsack to the table, waving his wand over it while uttering a spell to reveal magical protections. She could have told him she had done nothing to ward her bag, but she doubted he'd listen. He didn't seem to believe her intentions in tracking him down were as innocent as she'd claimed, and she supposed she couldn't blame him. After all, she wasn't being *entirely* honest, although she surmised the full truth would be just as unwelcome as whatever threat he perceived in her. Surely he'd be staggered to learn how many years she had spent thinking about him. Fantasies that had begun with finding him alive had somehow changed with time, just as she had. It hadn't surprised her when her imagination had conjured more ... prurient ... scenarios, as they'd coincided with her ever-increasing dissatisfaction in her personal life. And while she had never before fantasized about Snape tying her to a chair, she couldn't deny her current situation held a certain potential, albeit a rather naughty one. If only he'd stop grumbling long enough to actually speak to her ...

"Why are you pawing through my bag?" she asked.

He did not answer but kept rummaging through the depths of her knapsack, pulling out random articles, examining them for a fraction of a second before tossing them away.

She tried again. "What *are* you looking for?"

"Answers."

"If there's something you'd like to know, you could just ask," she informed him.

He paused for a moment and pierced her with a look that would have made her squirm twenty years ago. "And listen to your clever lies?" he asked. "I think not."

"There was a time when you could discern the truth with a mere glance," she told him when he resumed his search.

"And there was a time when you were intelligent enough to rebuff the attentions of Weasley," he replied, holding up her passport.

In her haste to depart England, she'd neglected to change her name back to Granger. As her children still carried the Weasley name, she wasn't entirely sure she *wanted* to change it just yet.

His face was smug, causing her to lift her chin in defiance. "I'm not married to Ron."

"I see." He came around the table and stood directly across from her. His eyes narrowed as he said, "A wise choice, eschewing the runt of the litter. Tell me, which of the Weasley brood did you select in his stead? Percy? Charlie? They seem likely candidates for a girl like you."

She couldn't help the unladylike snort that escaped at his choice of terms. "I've had two children and lived more than four decades; I can hardly be considered a girl anymore. Or hadn't you noticed?" She watched his eyes travel down her body and felt her face grow warm.

"I noticed." His voice had deepened, and she was reminded of the way his hands had felt when he'd searched for her wand.

"Not Percy or Charlie, then?" he asked. She shook her head, and he said, "Good Lord, you didn't marry George, did you?"

She laughed and replied, "No, it was Ron. I was married to Ron."

He was silent for a moment, his brows drawn. "Widowed?"

"No."

He began to smirk. "Divorced."

"No."

"Separated."

"No."

His heavy sigh stirred the air, sending infinitesimal dust particles to swirl with delight in the sunbeam. "You're no longer married to Ron, but you're neither divorced, widowed, nor separated."

"Right."

He closed his eyes, fingers rising to massage his temples. "It's been twenty years since I've experienced a headache quite like this. Coincidence?"

"I'd say that's doubtful, sir."

"Explain yourself, Miss Granger. Er ... Mrs. Weasley?"

"Ms. Granger. It's a long story."

"That's quite alright; you're not going anywhere." Flipping the passport over his shoulder, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the table. Long legs stretched out until his knees nearly brushed against hers. "And my schedule has miraculously been cleared. So, please ... do tell."

She drew her lower lip between her teeth, thinking of how best to proceed. "Well ... I married Ron, and we had two children. Shortly after our youngest, Rose, left for Hogwarts, a Ministry official came to call and informed us our marriage wasn't quite valid. The wizard who performed our wedding ceremony was not properly ... qualified ... to marry us, you see." She finished in a rush, clearing her throat when the smirk returned to his face.

She hadn't mentioned that arranging for the wizard to marry them had been the *one* task she'd allowed Ron to handle among the thousands she'd flawlessly executed for their wedding. And she certainly wasn't going to relate Ron's confession of having chosen the wizard in question because he'd cost half as much as the others.

"Surely it was a simple matter to correct?" asked Snape.

"Well ... yes, it would have been. The official who visited us was actually qualified to remarry us right then and there. But ..."

"But?"

She bit her lip again, hesitating over the rest of the tale. It had been Ron who had suggested they leave things as-is, much to the shock of both Hermione and the Ministry official.

"Maybe this happened for a reason," Ron had told her. "I know you think marrying me was a mistake."

"No," she had protested, although it had sounded hollow, even to her own ears.

"It's okay to make mistakes, Hermione," Ron had said. "And I know you ... You'll spend the rest of your life trying to make this perfect, trying to make *us* perfect. But there are some things that can't be perfect, no matter how hard you work at them. And in the meantime, we're depriving ourselves of a *real* chance at happiness."

She had known he was right, had felt herself relaxing more and more with each second she had contemplated it. Until the guilt had begun to creep in. "But ... the children..."

"... are amazingly well-adjusted kids with two parents who love them," he had said with a shrug, making it all sound so simple. "That's not likely to change, is it?"

"No, of course not."

"I know you're not truly happy here."

"Is anyone truly happy?" she had asked, but her thoughts had immediately turned to Harry and Ginny, and from the look on Ron's face, she had known he had been thinking of them, too. They had remained very much in love; the years had only strengthened their devotion to each other.

"We've been friends for thirty years...nothing can change that." Ron had seemed resigned to the fact their marriage had been devoid of passion for many years.

"I *do* love you, Ron...you know that, right?" She had known his self-confidence had always been fragile, but she had never intended for her personal dissatisfaction to cause him further doubt.

"I know you do," he had said. "We'll always share a special bond." And although the words had remained unspoken, she had imagined he had been thinking them, just as they had rung out in her head: *It's not enough*. He had taken both her hands in his and had said, "We have two amazing children, and I wouldn't trade that...or the past thirty years...for the world. If this had happened when the kids were young, I might feel different. But now ... I don't know, babe. Maybe this is our chance to do something we never would have done otherwise."

In the end, she had been unable to find a convincing enough argument to remarry Ron. Even as she had sat there, dumbfounded, watching Ron usher out the Ministry official, an idea had already begun to form in her mind. She could leave England! She could retire from her job at the Ministry and travel to Argentina, as she had always secretly longed to do. And she could find Snape.

It had all been shockingly easy to arrange. Telling the children had been the hardest part, but they had taken it all in their stride, accepting their new reality in that easy way children have. They had already become so immersed in their lives at Hogwarts that the thought of where they'd spend their holidays had been of little consequence to them. Within a few short weeks, friends had been told, her position with the Ministry had been resigned, and her journey to Argentina had begun. She had never really believed she'd find Snape so quickly, but here he was. Inches away. Staring at her pointedly, awaiting the conclusion of her story.

"We decided we'd both be happier apart than together," she finished at last.

"I see."

She doubted he did, but she refrained from saying as much.

He continued to stare at her in silent contemplation. Questions were buzzing through her mind like a swarm of angry bees. "How did you survive Nagini's bite?" she asked when her curiosity overcame her patience.

"A potion."

"What sort of a potion?"

"I'll ask the questions here," he said, eyes narrowing again.

She supposed his tone was intimidating, but despite that...and despite the fact she was tied to a chair, completely at his mercy...she felt remarkably unafraid. "Okay," she said. "Ask away."

"What is your purpose here?"

"I told you my purpose ... to find you. I knew your body disappeared from the Shrieking Shack that day, and I've always wondered if you'd somehow survived."

"It's quite a long trip for idle curiosity," he replied, his voice heavy with obvious disbelief. "Kingsley warned me of your rampant interest in my whereabouts."

"So he *did* know you were alive. I knew it!" It was yet another suspicion proved correct; she was having a banner day. Shaking her head, she said, "That sly dog ... He never would admit it."

"Kingsley, at least, respected my wishes to remain anonymous. A pity you couldn't do the same."

"I've no intention of revealing your identity, Professor Snape." She watched him bristle when she spoke his name.

"What was your real intention in coming all this way? To return me to Britain?"

"Why would I do that?"

"You work for the Ministry, don't you?"

She nodded and said, "Until a few weeks ago, at least." Did he suppose she was here on Ministry business?

He frowned and said, "I recall you having a relentless and convoluted sense of justice. Dare I hope that has changed with the passage of time?"

Unsure of where he was going with this line of questions, she mirrored his frown. "I still believe in the difference between right and wrong, if that's what you're asking."

"Aha!"

"Aha?"

"You've arranged a trial for me, haven't you?"

"What? No!" she spluttered, straining forward, cursing her inability to gesticulate. "Didn't Kingsley tell you there was an investigation of your activities, years ago? You were fully acquitted of any wrongdoing."

Suspicion darkened his features. "My communications with Kingsley have been limited."

"That's a pity," she said with a shrug. "Everyone knows the truth about Dumbledore's death now. And your role as spy earned you a posthumous Order of Merlin. You're a hero in the world you left behind. A dead hero, but a hero nonetheless."

"You're lying."

"No." She shook her head, saddened that he hadn't ever been curious as to what was happening in their world. She could hardly blame him, though. He'd been used and sacrificed by Dumbledore, manipulated and nearly killed by Voldemort, and distrusted by everyone else. It was little wonder he'd wished to cease all contact with the wizarding world, and unfortunately, it was easy to see why he'd question her motivations now.

Her eyes fell to the wand held casually in his fingers. "You were once a gifted Legilimens," she said, raising her eyebrows in challenge. "Have your skills faded with time?"

"Hardly."

"Well, then ... Since you obviously don't believe me, why don't you look for yourself? I have nothing to hide."

One slim eyebrow arched onto his forehead. "The Dark Lord was a skilled Legilimens, as well, yet I was able to ensure he saw only what I wanted him to see."

"I'm flattered you would imagine me capable of such subterfuge," she told him with a dry laugh. "But I assure you, I'm a mediocre liar at best, and I've had no cause or opportunity to practice this sort of magic."

He studied her for several long moments, and she began to wonder if he was already performing Legilimency. Wasn't she supposed to feel something?

"Are you quite certain you wish to do this?" he asked at length.

Her heart pounded as she suddenly recalled the pain Harry had described from his disastrous Occlumency lessons. Taking a deep breath, she clenched her hands into fists behind her back, steeling herself against whatever might come.

"Quite certain," she answered with far more confidence than she felt.

Barrida: Any move in which one partner's foot appears to push or pull the other's foot along the floor as they make a step together.

Severus gave an imperceptible flick of his wand and whispered, '*Legilimens*.'

It had been many years since he'd cast this particular spell, and he wasn't entirely sure he *wanted* to witness the inner workings of this woman's mind. But curiosity quickly overruled his hesitation.

Random impressions hit him at a dizzying speed: Hermione arguing with her friends...and Kingsley...over what she'd seen outside the Shrieking Shack; her unwavering conviction once she'd found that blasted article he'd written on yerba mate; her tireless campaigning of both the press and the Wizengamot, all on his behalf. Her unshakable faith in him...the fact that *she* had been his greatest champion throughout the years...came as a complete shock. Kingsley had informed him of her insistence on learning more about him, but he hadn't appreciated the constancy of her obsession until now. Once inside her mind, he could *feel* it: the certainty she was right, despite the dismissal of everyone she knew and a mountain of evidence to the contrary. There was a sense of longing there, too; it ebbed and flowed through her thoughts, underscoring her actions, at times faint, at other times, nearly overwhelming. He wasn't sure if he was more stunned by her efforts or her unflinching support.

He was cognizant of the fact he'd never treated her particularly well in school, but he had had his reasons. Watching yet another bright witch lie and make excuses for yet another Potter had done little to convince him she had deserved anything more than his disdain. But she was a grown woman now, a fact he was continually reminded of each time he recalled the way she'd felt in his arms. Perhaps more than her body had matured in the past two decades...perhaps she had come to understand what it meant to make difficult choices and live with regrets.

He began to wonder just what sort of life she'd had over the past twenty years...what sort of woman she'd become. Like fast-forwarding through a film, images of her life flashed through his mind. He watched her triumphs and disappointments at the Ministry, a part of his brain marveling at the tenacity required for her to have achieved so much amidst the quagmire of such bureaucracy. Then he turned to her children, and he was nearly strangled by the myriad joys and fears of parenthood. The sense of guilt and loss as she stood on the platform watching the Hogwarts Express fade into the distance was so sharp he felt nauseated from the sudden, unexpected wave of pain. This was obviously a woman who loved deeply, yet he witnessed nothing more than a feeling of comfort, friendship, and mild ennui as she listened to her husband snoring softly each night. Experiencing such tolerant thoughts towards the likes of Ron Weasley was disconcerting in the extreme, but quickly forgotten when he realized how often her mind conjured *his* image as she lay awake in bed. With increasing frequency, she was picturing her former Potions master in situations he was quite certain he'd never been privy to. Invariably, her hand would travel beneath the covers, her fingers slipping inside...

Whoa!

He couldn't believe the number of times she had thought about him...*him!*...as she had touched herself so intimately. He could feel her pushing against his mind now, urging him out of her thoughts, but he couldn't resist watching her, feeling her climax just one more time as she imagined him inside her.

Leaving her mind at last, he focused on her face, pleased to note the flush on her cheeks. Her breaths were fast and shallow, and the way her lips had parted made his arousal strain almost painfully against his pants.

"Oops," she whispered. "So much for having nothing to hide."

He rarely acted on impulse, and later, he would blame his next move on having just witnessed such an erotic scene. It was difficult to deny how appealing she looked sitting before him with a shaft of light tangling in her undisciplined curls. Her unusual scent of lemon and coconut was warmed by the sun and her own rapidly beating pulse, and it wafted towards him, teasing his senses and tempting his better judgment. Without fully realizing what he was doing, he leaned towards her, watching as her pupils dilated and she, in turn, moved towards him. Her eyes remained open when their lips touched, and he watched the soft, brown circles widen. Then he moved his mouth against hers, gently, slowly. He saw her eyelids flutter, heard her quiet sigh, and he knew she welcomed his caress. His hand cupped the side of her face. Tilting her head, he pressed his mouth to hers again, harder this time. Her lips were warm and yielding, her skin petal-soft. The tip of his tongue traced along her mouth, intending only to taste, to tease, but delving deeper the instant her lips parted. Her tongue stroked along his, hesitantly at first, slightly awkward in the way all kisses were when everything was new. Somehow, he found her efforts more endearing for their clumsiness; the notion of a mature, forty-something woman having little experience in kissing new men was surprisingly charming.

"Are you mad?" he asked when he finally pulled away. He wasn't entirely sure whether he was asking her...or questioning himself.

"You mean ... for fantasizing about a man who was often cruel to me and most likely dead?" she asked with an odd little half-smile. "Yes, I suppose some might consider that a bit ... um ... disturbed."

"Why, then?" He was surprised by how anxious he was for her answer.

"I don't know," she answered with a slight pout that made her look young and just a bit vulnerable. "It started with the memories you gave Harry, I suppose. They convinced me my opinion of you had been based on a very narrow spectrum of information. And ... well ..."

"Well?"

"Well ... As we discussed earlier ... I'm a sucker for lost causes."

It was a lot to absorb in the course of one morning. Luckily, Severus prided himself on being a master of assimilation, among other things. And much like the day his previous landlords had handed him the deed to Casa del Jaan, he was not about to question the whims of sudden fortune. Good things tended to happen when he simply relaxed and allowed life to run its natural course. Testing his theory, he lowered his head and claimed the lips of the woman before him once more. She responded instantly, opening to his demands and drawing him inside with a hunger much sharper than he'd tasted earlier. There was a noticeable lack of awkwardness this time, and he couldn't help but stifle a smirk. She had always been a fast learner; it was no surprise she'd mastered the art of kissing him in record time.

With a great deal of effort, he pulled his mouth away and stared at her once more, trying to decide if this was all an elaborate hoax. Or perhaps he had yet to wake up; perhaps this was simply an amazingly detailed dream. Surely it was pure fantasy to accept this unpredictable figure from his past...this woman who had periodically managed to infiltrate his thoughts over the years...was truly sitting before him with lips swollen from his kisses and a look of desire on her flushed face.

"Are you going to unbind me now?" she asked.

"No, I don't believe I will."

"Pervert."

"You have no idea," he said, delighted by the sound of her answering laughter. When her smile had faded, he asked, "When will you return to England?"

"You're trying to get rid of me already?"

"I'm merely considering my options."

"I see. Well, release my wrists, and I'll fill you in on my plans."

He flicked his wand and listened to the small "whoosh" of the magical bindings disintegrating. "Your plans?" he asked.

She offered a small laugh, and he thought she sounded a bit nervous. "To be honest, the only plans I had made involved *getting* to Argentina," she admitted. "For the first time in my life, I find myself without any plans for the future."

Interesting, he thought. He wondered if that meant she was going to stay. "This country has much to offer. Perhaps you should stay for a while."

"I'd like to," she said, eyeing him closely.

What was he supposed to do now? He could suggest she stay here ... with him ... but what if she rejected the idea outright? She didn't kiss him as if she'd reject him, but then again, she had been tied to a chair when they had kissed. Now that she was free to leave ... would she?

"I've been obsessing about Argentina for so long," she supplied. "It would be a pity to leave before experiencing it fully."

"It would indeed," he agreed. "Do you suppose you'll miss Britain?"

"I'll miss my children," she replied instantly. "But everything else ..." Her shoulders rose in an unconcerned shrug. "... I have no job to return to. I have no husband, and apparently, I never really had a marriage. I don't have many friends." She began to look uncomfortable. "Do *you* ever miss it?"

He shook his head. "I used to lament the loss of elf-made wine, but I've discovered an excellent Malbec from the Catena Zapata Nicasia Vineyard in Mendoza. I'm quite content now."

Smiling, she said, "Well, the children will be at school for the next several months, so perhaps I could learn to become quite content, as well."

"I believe you'll find Argentina offers a rich cultural experience for children on holiday." Her gaze seemed expectant, so he added, "In case you find yourself reluctant to leave, that is."

"Good to know."

She seemed to be waiting for him to make some further overture, but he was hesitant to risk it just yet. If she wanted to stay, it had to be her idea. He cleared his throat and said, "I couldn't help notice you've been rather ... preoccupied ... with finding me."

A delightful blush colored her cheeks, accompanied by a crooked smile that stretched to her eyes. "Yes, you could say that."

"Tell me, Ms. Granger, what will you do now you've found me?"

She stood from her chair and approached him slowly. Placing her palms on his chest, she watched him for a moment, perhaps to see if he'd shun the contact. When he remained still, she said, "First, I'm going to insist you call me Hermione. I'm afraid you cannot continue to call me Ms. Granger if you're going to kiss me that way."

He was unable to keep his lips from curling into a smile. "As you wish. Hermione." His arms circled her back, and he felt her melting into him. "What on earth will you find to obsess over now?"

"I believe there may be one or two things about you I could still obsess over," she told him with a cheeky wink. "And when I'm done with those, well ... I've always wanted to learn how to make cheese."

"Cheese?"

"That's right. I bought a book on it and everything."

"Did I mention this farm came with a dozen milking ewes?"

"Is that so?" she asked. "Did it come with a spare bedroom as well?"

Now we're getting somewhere, he thought. "I'm afraid not," he lied. "One bedroom, one bed." He had to ensure she knew exactly what staying here would mean.

"Is that an invitation?" she asked.

"Do you want it to be?"

He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until she smiled and murmured, "Mmm-hmm." She leaned up on the tips of her toes and pressed her lips to his. Then her tone became businesslike as she said, "But I'll need the side of the bed nearer the toilet. Pregnancy does things to the bladder."

He raised an eyebrow but replied, "I suppose that's acceptable, as I require the side nearer the door. Spying does things to the mind."

"And I'm always cold at night, so I'll likely steal the covers."

"Keep them; I cannot abide anything more than a sheet."

"Wow, Snape," she said with a soft whistle. "If you tell me you sit down to pee, I might just fall in love."

He snorted and said, "Don't push your luck. And don't call me Snape; my name happens to be Santiago Sanchez."

"Right," she said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "We'll work on the peeing thing later. Shall I send to the hotel for my bag?"

"If you're quite certain about this."

"I am."

"I suppose you'll insist on several long, meaningful conversations about the past ... the choices we've made ... the lives we've led?" He dreaded such conversations, but in his limited experience, it seemed women could discuss such things endlessly.

"Not at all," she replied. "We've already sorted the bed and the loo...surely the most important issues in any relationship. Everything else will work itself out." Grinning, she slid her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

Her words echoed through his mind, and just before he lost himself in her kiss, he realized, despite all odds, he actually believed her.

A/N: Many thanks to sunny33 and kittylefish for beta-reading this story. Not only are these ladies all kinds of lovely, but they're absolute life-savers, as well! I am blessed and honored to have such friends.

The motto of the Universidad del Sur in Bahía Blanca, Argentina, truly is *Ardua Veritatem*, and the Lola Mora sculptures in the fountain are simply remarkable. Read all about it:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bah%C3%ADa_Blanca

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lola_Mora

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_University_of_the_South

Before meeting Karelia, my knowledge of Argentina was limited to it being the birthplace of my favorite NBA basketball player, Manu Ginóbili. Upon further research, I learned Ginóbili was actually born in Bahía Blanca, which is, in fact, what led me to discover all the information above. For those unfamiliar with Manu, he's made of yum. Silky, black hair ... intense, dark eyes ... crooked, long, hooked nose ... thin lips. Sound like anyone we know?! From the photo below, I can easily imagine Snape disappearing among the denizens of Bahía Blanca.

<http://sportswrap.berecruited.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/Manu%20Ginobili.jpg>

Here you will find information on yerba mate, an indigenous Argentine plant: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yerba_mate

And if anyone can find (or afford!) a bottle of the Catena Zapata Nicasia Vineyard 2005 Malbec mentioned by Snape, I would love to know. It sounds simply divine. And of course, Malbec is the perfect wine for Snape...some claim its name derives from the French translation of "bad break." If you drink red wine for its health benefits, you should know that Malbec contains the highest amounts of oligomeric procyanidins (OPCs), believed to help protect against a number of diseases and environmental stresses.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malbec>

<http://www.slate.com/id/2085241/>

<http://www.wine.com/v6/Malbec/Red-Wines/learnabout.aspx?class=1&varietal=12221&Nao=10>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proanthocyanidin>